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ABSTRACT

One very active approach that school personnel can employ to help at-risk students to successfully complete school is to maximize the natural parent support system as early as possible. Parent training programs generally adhere to one of the following models: (1) the parent-as-teacher model, which trains parents to use behavior management techniques and assist their children to learn interpersonal, communication, and academic skills; (2) the mixed model, which trains parents to identify and access community resources to meet specific and unique family needs; and (3) the parent-as-trainer model, which incorporates features of the other models and trains parents to train other parents. Three Lehman College projects involving parent training, the Parent Training Program (1983-86), the Science and Technology Entry Program (STEP), and the College Discovery and Development Program (CDDP), are described. The following parent skill needs are highlighted: (1) communicating with their children; (2) setting realistic academic goals, including collaboration with school personnel; (3) advocating for their children in the school system; (4) disciplining and setting limits at home, including teaching children to evaluate their own behavior; and (5) supporting, maintaining, and extending the academic program to the home environment. The pivotal roles of teachers and guidance personnel as parent trainers are discussed in light of recent research. A list of nine references is appended. (FMW)

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Training Parents To Utilize Support Strategies To Maximize Their Children's School Experiences and Foster Successful School Completion

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Running Head: TRAINING PARENTS TO UTILIZE SUPPORT STRATEGIES

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Abstract

One very active approach that school personnel can employ to help "at-risk" students to successfully complete school is to maximize, as early as possible, the natural parent support system. This paper examines support strategies that parents of academically and socially "at-risk" students can be trained to utilize. Several models of parent training are described. Data from two separately funded Lehman College Projects involving parent training efforts are presented. Highlighted are support strategies parents need to learn to: (1) communicate more effectively with their children; (2) set realistic goals for their children during each school year, including collaborative planning with school personnel; (3) advocate more effectively for their children within the school system; (4) discipline and set limits more effectively for their children at home, including teaching their children to self-evaluate their own behaviors; and (5) support, maintain, and extend the academic program to the home environment. The pivotal roles of teachers and guidance personnel as parent trainers are discussed in light of current research findings.

Training Parents To Utilize Support Strategies To Maximize Their Children's School Experiences and Foster Successful School Completion

Introduction:

One approach that school personnel can employ to help "academically and behaviorally at-risk" adolescents to successfully complete school is to maximize, as early as possible, the natural parent support system through an array of parent training programs. While the majority of parent training programs reported in the literature have been documented for parents of special education students, the support strategies they offer can be modified to meet the needs of classified as well as nonclassified students. Parent training efforts must be viewed within a long-term context, and must recognize the potential value of parents as "change agents" for their children (Shea & Bauer, 1985). However, given the burgeoning number of single parent families, the effects of poverty, the current drug epidemic, and the "loss of faith" many parents experience in relation to the schools, this valuable parent resource has become more and more estranged from the parent-school partnership. To counter this increasing alienation, a systematic effort on the part of school personnel to involve parents and provide them with concrete strategies that will directly benefit their children is needed.

Parent training programs for parents of children who are "academically and behaviorally at-risk" have been documented extensively throughout the 1970's and 1980's. In general, parent training programs may be viewed from an ecological perspective, positing that a change in one system surrounding the child impacts on other systems surrounding the child. Therefore, training parents to make changes in the home in the quality of parenting including the teaching of specific school related and social skills, affects the way in which a child views him/herself and the way s(he) interacts in the world with peers, teachers, etc. Hence changes in the home lead to changes in school, and overtime possibly changes in the community. The extent to which perceptions of a given child in each of these

settings becomes more consistent with each other is termed "congruence" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Increased congruence is an important ecological consequence of parent training.

Parent training programs for parents of children who are "academically and behaviorally at risk" have dealt with a wide range of issues and have employed several theoretical training models (Halvorsen, 1982; Hurwitz & Polirstok, 1985; Polirstok & Hurwitz, 1984). In the "Parent-as-Teacher" model, parents are trained to use behavior management techniques and to assist their children in learning and maintaining interpersonal skills, communication skills, and academic skills. The "Mixed" model of parent training attempts to meet the specific and unique needs of families by identifying relevant community resources and instructing parents in how to access these resources. The "Parent-as-Trainer" model incorporates aspects of the other two models, but in addition prepares parents as "turnkey" trainers of other parents (Hall, Grinstead, Collier, & Hall, 1980). Because of this "trainer of trainers" component, the last model is the most cost effective. Regardless of which parent training model is adopted, overcoming barriers to parent participation including transportation problems, communication problems, child care problems, time constraints and/or cultural differences is crucial to a program's overall success.

In view of these models of parent training, two Lehman College Parent Training Projects, one involving parents of special education students grades K- JHS, and the other involving parents of regular education JHS and HS students, will be highlighted to illustrate the extent to which parents can be trained to use specialized support strategies and techniques that can benefit their children in the educational system.

The Parent Training Program at Lehman College (1983-1986):

This project was initiated by Drs. Polirstok and Hurwitz through a federally funded research grant (029 PH 30 099). The overall aim was to train parents and teachers of children with learning and behavior problems as turnkey trainers of

other parents in both home-based and school-based settings. During Years 01 and 02, 18 teachers from schools in the target district earned six free graduate credits for participating in a two-term training program in home-based and school-based activities for parents of children with learning and behavior problems. The teachers were responsible for recruiting parents and initiating activities both in parents' homes and in the schools. In the home-based settings, a 10-session behavior management skills package was taught to help parents more effectively manage their children's behaviors. Parents were also taught to dispense reinforcement to their children for appropriate homework and study behaviors. In the school-based setting, teachers established weekly parent support groups where information about resources in the community, etiology of learning and behavior problems, and practical management suggestions were disseminated according to needs assessment findings.

After two years of teacher-directed activities, the project shifted its focus to parent-directed activities in the third year. Parents who functioned as parent-trainers participated in a modified training seminar which added information to what the parents had already learned as trainees during the two previous years. These parent-leaders were then responsible for initiating parent training activities similar to those conducted by teachers during the previous two years. Hence teachers trained parents, who in turn trained other parents.

The community-based component was comprised of a Parent Advisory Council which met monthly at a local Community Center throughout the three year project. The Council sponsored guest speakers on a variety of subjects. Meeting were open to the public and part of each monthly meeting was devoted to parents asking specific questions related to problems they were experiencing with their children at home or in the school system.

The number of parents who received training and participated in one or more of these components across all three years totaled 240. Since parents of children who are encountering problems in school often have negative feelings about the

schools and become estranged from its professionals, this project enabled parents to be positively involved in an ongoing school-community partnership.

The ecological impact of the project can be viewed from the context of qualitative changes in parent-child, parent-teacher, teacher-child, and parent-community interactions. Teachers as well as parent-leaders in the project attained high levels of performance in both home-based and school-based components and were perceived by parents of children with learning and behavior problems as helpful and effective. Overall, training parents to be cognizant about dispensing reinforcement to their children and more understanding of the factors that give rise to learning and behavior problems, contributed to increases in self-concept in their children. As a result of their project involvement, parents were more committed to making sure their children attended school regularly. However, despite increases in self-concept and attendance, no statistically significant gains were noted for reading achievement. Prior school history including attendance patterns, quality of past teaching, english proficiency, and overall intelligence may overshadow any gains that might be a result of increased parent involvement (Polirstok, 1987a).

The Science and Technology Entry Program (STEP) and The College Discovery and Development Program (CDDP) at Lehman College:

Both of these programs are part of the Lehman Center for School-College Collaboratives. The STEP Program is funded through a grant from The New York State Education Department, Bureau of Professional Career Opportunities and targets junior high school students primarily. CDDP is funded cooperatively by The City University of New York and The New York City Board of Education, and targets promising high school students as potential CUNY enrollees. The Dwight D. Eisenhower Title IIA Grant is an additional funding source for aspiring students in these programs. The goal of STEP and CDDP is to assist underrepresented minority or economically disadvantaged secondary school students in acquiring the skills and knowledges needed to study pre-professional or professional programs

in scientific, technical, and helath-related fields. An additional goal is to enhance the motivation and aspiration of minority students toward these careers. In addition to a Summer Math and Science Enrichment Institute (SMSI), students receive coaching and support from project teachers in the participating schools.

Both of these programs recognize the importance of parents in helping children to successfully negotiate junior high school and high school, and both have parent components which seek to increase parent support through the use of workshops, networking, and newsletters. The worshops which are scheduled approximately every 6 weeks, are structured in three parts: (1) the first part of the workshop is devoted to parents asking questions relevant to specific concerns about their children ranging from school issues to adolescent issues; (2) the second part of the workshop is devoted to discussion topics determined by a needs assessment questionnaire (topics include: applying to high school, applying to college, understanding science and math curricula, home reinforcement activities for science and math, and communicating more effectively with teenagers); and (3) the third part of each workshop is devoted to a core of important parenting skills: communication skills, goal setting skills, advocacy skills, and behavior management techniques including parents as self-evaluation trainers for their children. Two Saturday workshops where parents and their teenagers are invited to work collaboratively on science and math related projects are also part of the parent component.

Overall, the thrust of these parent activities is to: (1) increase parent involvement in their children's education; (2) provide a support network for parents so that they feel less isolated about their children's school or home problems; (3) increase parent-school cooperation; (4) increase parent awareness of career opportunities in math and science, and (5) enhance the recruitment effort of Lehman College by increasing parent knowledge about Lehman College, its campus, and its programs.

Parent Support Strategies:

All three of the programs discussed thus far have employed a common core of parent training activities. This common core of support strategies for parents includes training in communication skills, goal setting, advocacy, and behavior management techniques, with emphasis on parents as self-evaluation trainers for their children. All of these strategies, with the exception of self-evaluation, can be taught in one to two sessions of approximately 90 minutes per session. Self-evaluation training requires substantially more training time and extensive at home observation time. However, the key to assisting parents in implementing any of these techniques, is to devote time each session to individual parent questions, concerns and needs that pertain directly to their child. The interaction between parent and professional during these "open" workshop times provides the necessary support for parents to implement changes in school-related priorities, the parent-child relationship, social expectations, and the style of parenting.

Communication skills. One essential step in increasing effective parent-child communication is teaching parents to be "good listeners." This involves listening completely to what a child is saying before a parent reacts or responds. Good listening is important because parents may often react too quickly to what an adolescent is saying, as a consequence of incorrect or premature judgements made about a child's communications. A second support strategy taught to parents involves "mirroring or reflecting" what a child has said. This is important because this technique reinforces good listening in parents, demonstrates that the message has been received at least in part, provides the child with an opportunity to really "hear" what (s)he has said, and fosters fine tuning of the communication if necessary, through the process of re-statement and clarification on the part of both parent and child.

The techniques of "good listening" and "reflecting" are two very basic but essential components to effective parent-child communication. The actual training of parents in these skills can be very engaging through the use of role-play techniques. Additional support can be derived from parents discussing

key words, phrases and expressions employed by their children in their everyday language. Learning to decode these key words, phrases and expressions can be a very tangible advantage of parent training in communication skills.

Goal setting. Parents of "academically at-risk" students need to be taught how to set appropriate and realistic academic goals (both short term and longer term) for their children. The training for parents is aimed at: (1) increasing the organizational skills of their children through the use of a large calendar or charting procedure; (2) targeting in conjunction with the child's classroom teacher or teachers, specific tasks or skills that must be acquired or mastered in set period of time; (3) monitoring the child's home and school work in a systematic way to determine if assignments on the calendar have been completed satisfactorily and charting the grades received; and (4) providing feedback and reinforcment to the child regarding work completion and the child's status in relation to goals that were set cooperatively. For those parents who are naturally involved with their children's academic progress, goal setting is a direct consequence of this involvement. However, for a large majority of parents who often feel that their own academic abilities may not be sophisticated enough to warrant involvement, goal setting strategies enable them to become involved more from a "managerial" standpoint, than from a "parent-as-teacher" perspective.

Utilizing these goal setting strategies, parents learn that they can be more directly involved in helping their child succeed in reaching short term and longer term goals academically. In fact, the nature of the reinforcers used by parents can themselves serve to maintain and extend the academic program in the home environment. For example, a family trip to the AT&T InfoQuest Exhibit, which a child earned as a reinforcer for improved performance in science, may very well itself reinforce additional science learning. If a parent can be trained to identify reinforcers that can motivate additional learning, then the home environment can be a meaningful extension of the school program, provided there is ongoing parent-teacher communication.

Advocacy. One of the most important roles parents can play in their child's "school" life is that of advocate. An advocate by definition, is someone who champions a "cause"; many of our "academically and behaviorally at-risk" students can very well be termed "causes". Parents need to know that their imput is valued by educators. However, to maximize their imput, parents need to learn how to deal effectively with various members of the school hierarchy. For example, a parent must be able to communicate effectively with teachers in developing goals collaboratively. If a parent or child is unhappy with how a particular problem or event was dealt with by a member of a school staff, then the parent must learn how best to confront this issue in the least combative way. Parents of problematic students often report feeling overwhelmed and intimidated by school personnel. In this context, parent assertiveness training becomes a key component in developing parents as advocates.

While advocacy and assertiveness skills can be taught in 2-3 training sessions, the implementation of these skills in very specific situations mandates close monitoring by parent trainers and school personnel. To this end, school administrators can set an important agenda for teachers and provide training in ways to increase and maintain parent involvement and advocacy.

Behavior management. "At-risk" adolescents can often present serious learning and behavior management problems for parents and teachers. Teaching adolescents to evaluate and consequate their own behaviors has tremendous implications for school completion. Training "at-risk" adolescents to use self-evaluation techniques places the responsibility for academic and social behavior on the adolescent and teaches him/her to provide consequences for these behaviors, thereby reducing the "policing demand" on adult authority (Polirstok, in press).

The most widely employed self-evaluation procedures involve teaching an adolescent to identify a behavior for assessment, and to monitor, record and evaluate the frequency of that behavior in relation to a set of criteria. The adolescent is then instructed to reward him/herself using reinforcers that may

often be self-selected, for attaining acceptable levels of academic and social behavior based on those predetermined criteria. Another type of self-evaluation that can be trained in adolescents employs "verbal self-instruction." Training verbal self instruction involves teaching students to verbalize a specific and directive series of questions and/or statements that are oriented towards problem solving. These statements involve (1) defining the problem ("What's my problem?"), (2) determining response alternatives ("What's my plan?"), (3) reinforcing oneself for selecting a correct response and resolving the situation correctly (Did I do it correctly?"), and (4) selecting a "fix-up" strategy ("What else can I do?") if the preceding steps were not adequate to resolve the problem. Overall, this process of verbal self-instruction can be very helpful to adolescents in developing problem solving strategies that be generalized to a variety of school-based and home-based situations.

Parents and teachers, by virtue of the contact time they spend with adolescents, are the most logical, and potentially the most successful candidates to serve as self-evaluation trainers. Initially parents and teachers who wish to employ self-evaluation procedures need a basic understanding of reinforcement principles. With this foundation in place, the essential components of self-evaluation can then be trained: (1) the selection of a target behavior(s); (2) the observation and charting of target behavior(s); (3) the development of a behavior rating system; (4) the use of feedback to provide information about the appropriateness of the adolescent's responses (often done through a matching of student self-ratings to parent or teacher ratings over a set period of time); and (5) the use of a reward system to recognize accurate self-reporting.

Of the self-evaluation components outlined above, providing the adolescent with feedback about the appropriateness of his/her responses can be most significant in producing academic and social behavior improvements. This is accomplished initially by parent or teacher rating the adolescent for a specific period of time on one or more of the targeted behavior(s), and explaining to the

adolescent the factors that contributed to that rating. When the parent or teacher is certain that the adolescent understands the manner in which ratings were derived, a matching procedure is instituted. The matching procedure permits the adolescent to earn points for closely approximating parent or teacher ratings of their own behavior(s); the closer the match of the ratings, the greater the number of points that can be earned. Thus, adolescents can learn more about how their behavior is viewed or rated by significant others in the environment (Polirstok, in press).

When adolescents can consistently match parent or teacher ratings over a period of time, the parent or teacher can begin to fade out the matching program and rely more heavily on student self-evaluation reports. However, to ensure that students continue to self-evaluate accurately, matching may continue on a limited variable ratio or interval schedule.

The actual training of parents or teachers to implement self-evaluation procedures requires not only the theoretical discussion time, but "hands on" applications involving observation and charting of behavior, reinforcer identification, and feedback practice. This training curriculum for self-evaluation trainers can be accomplished over 8 to 10, 90-minute sessions and parallels a similar behavioral training program that was developed for parents by Polirstok (1987b).

Conclusion:

Active parent involvement is an integral part of helping student's to successfully complete school. A parent-school partnership is necessary to provide the level of support and direction sutdent's require to maximize the school experience. While many parents are concerned about their children's school progress, they are often lacking in key support strategies which could make the difference between success in school or failure and dropping out. A brief discussion of some of the key strategies that parents can employ have been

presented. However, the extent to which these support strategies can be utilized by parents is dependent on the nature of the home-school relationship. Ongoing parent collaboration with teachers is necessary in order to extend and maintain the academic and social goals of the school program to the home environment. While parents can be taught to utililze support strategies to maximize their children's school experiences, school personnel must take on the role of parent training and become true collaborative partners.

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